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Wind Swimmer: Engineers look into fall of Kits Pool's beloved public art

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For 19 years, the mechanical woman built by Vancouver artist Doug Taylor swam in the air on a stainless-steel pole high above Kits Pool, her legs and arms driven by a propeller that spun with the wind.

And then, despite having survived numerous fierce gales, she suddenly came crashing down in a blast of wind during last week's storm.

Without her, the busy pool on the Kitsilano waterfront seems strangely empty and many are wondering when she will return.

The beloved piece of public art known as *Wind Swimmer* was badly bent out of shape by the crash and is currently lying in the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation works yard while engineers try to figure out what gave way.

"It's not clear yet just what went wrong, but we have to make sure it won't happen again," said Jil Weaving, co-ordinator of the board's arts, culture and environment team.

Ms. Weaving said that, depending on what the engineers determine, the mobile sculpture may have to be modified, or the pole on which it perched may have to be changed.

But she said the plan is to return *Wind Swimmer* to the pool as soon as practical. "We know it's valued and loved. It's quite an iconic piece," she said. "People have been asking about it."

Meanwhile, Mr. Taylor has been fretting about the fate of the piece and the cause of the collapse. "I haven't had a good sleep since that happened," he said of the accident.

He said he was shocked when he learned that *Wind Swimmer* had taken a dive poolside and he was relieved that it didn't hit anyone. "I was deeply shocked by this," he said. "I just never thought it could happen."

Not many pieces of art are aerodynamically designed to withstand storms, but *Wind Swimmer* was.

"Twenty years ago, I did test it at the wind tunnel at UBC," Mr. Taylor said. "The way that piece has always protected itself is that at about 70 kilometres per hour, the propeller starts to collapse sideways. ... It stays down and then when the wind dies, it comes back into position again."

The storm that struck Vancouver a week ago, toppling trees onto power lines and leaving 500,000 BC Hydro customers without electricity, gusted to 80 km/h.

But Mr. Taylor said *Wind Swimmer* should have gone into its collapsed position and survived, as it did in 2006 when hurricane-force winds gusting to 120 km/h hit the city, damaging 3,000 trees in Stanley Park.

He wonders if the sculpture was struck by a freak blast, or if there was some other reason for the accident.

Either way, he said, he is hoping that the Vancouver parks board will give him a chance to repair the piece, which was purchased by the city after Herb and Mary Auerbach, long-time supporters of the arts in Vancouver, made a donation.

"It is quite damaged. The frame is a writeoff. ... A lot of the parts are okay, the body is okay. It can definitely be rebuilt," he said.

Mr. Taylor visited *Wind Swimmer* at the parks board yard and said it was heartbreaking to see a piece of art he had put so much into sitting

there like just another broken piece of machinery. "I took care of that piece for 20 years and I never before had to walk away out of a room and leave it with someone else before," he said. "That was disconcerting."

On Friday, (Sept. 4) the Vancouver parks board announced that Kits Pool, the busiest pool in the city with up to 2,000 swimmers a day, will have its season extended an extra week, to Sept. 20.

Since it opened in 1931, the pool has been immensely popular and many people regard it as the best public pool in the world. It may well be, but it has lost something without *Wind Swimmer*, whose front-crawl technique on a windy day was a thing of beauty.

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